The Long Schoolroom: Philosophical Readings in W.B. Yeats's poem 'Among School Children'

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Abstract

In the mid-1920 the poet W. B. Yeats was pleased to discover contemporary philosophers, Giovanni Gentile and A. N. Whitehead, whose metaphysical and educational philosophies seemed to coincide with his own commitments. Whitehead shares with Gentile a sense of reality as activity and an understanding of knowledge as constructed from abstractions that are open to evaluation and imaginative reconfiguration. Yeats was a Senator of the Irish Free State and took an interest in schooling. Soon after visiting a Montessori-inspired girls' school in Waterford, he began his poem 'Among School Children". (The text of the poem is printed at the end of this paper.) I argue that an awareness of the philosophical ideas Yeats had recently encountered should encourage restless rather than fixed interpretations of the poem and that this sense of restlessness and imaginative reconfiguration reflects the approach to education the three writers, at that time, shared: that at best our modes of apprehension provide only glimpses of reality and therefore each child's understanding and learning must be kept moving.

***Key Words**: W. B. Yeats, Giovanni Gentile, A. N. Whitehead; idealism; process philosophy; education; progressive schooling.*

Introduction

During the 1920s, when he was completing his esoteric work *A Vision* (1925) and composing the poems for his collection *The Tower* (1926), W. B. Yeats was excited to find contemporary philosophers whose speculations he felt coincided with his own ideas. Previously he had been drawn to philosophers such as Plato, Plotinus, Berkeley, Hegel and Nietzsche; he was well versed in the writings associated with the mystical Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and he had read Freud

and Jung. Now he was reading Henri Bergson, Benedetto Croce, Giovanni Gentile, and the British mathematician-turned-metaphysician, Alfred North Whitehead.

We can find out more about Yeats's philosophical reading at this time from his correspondence with his friend, Thomas Sturge Moore, a writer, theatre designer and artist. Moore was the brother of the Cambridge philosopher G. E. Moore and a portion of their correspondence from December 1925 onwards concerns the arguments against idealism in Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy* (Chapter 4) and G. E. Moore's paper 'The Refutation of Idealism'. Thomas Sturge Moore defends his brother's and Russell's position and Yeats defends Berkeley's. Yeats's motivation in supporting idealism is, at least in part, that he sees it as sympathetic to mystical experience. He shows a strong antipathy to scientific materialism and is confident that psychical research will reveal phenomena ruled out by empiricists. Yeats repeatedly urges Moore to read Gentile and in March 1926 he writes that he is reading Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World*:

> I have now read the greater part of it and so far it seems to me my own point of view. He proves, as I think, that the mechanical theory of the world is untrue (though it works, like other untrue things) and substitutes a theory of organism. It is concentrated logic and has the same intensity of thought - which is beauty - that I find in Gentile. He is of course realist, but the difference between his point of view and that of Gentile does not seem to me of much moment until one gets to ultimates, and one does not do that in this book. (Bridge, 1953; Letter 73: 89)

Whereas Yeats finds Whitehead to be largely compatible with Gentile, Sturge Moore finds him to be offering a response to idealism that parallels Russell's. At one point Yeats claims that his own position is 'more realist than idealist' (*ibid*; Letter 79: 99-100). In September 1927 he writes that he finds this kind of philosophical study 'helps my poetry which has I believe been at its best these last few months – indeed I am writing nothing but poetry' (*ibid*; Letter 89: 113). This period of intense philosophical reading and debate, and of poetic creativity, coincided with Yeats's public service as a senator of the newly-formed Irish Free State.

His role as a senator, and as a member of a committee investigating the state of Irish schools, took Yeats to St Otteran's School in Waterford, an elementary school for girls. Run by nuns, it emphasized self-development and free expression. In speeches Yeats had advocated a child-centred approach to schooling. He had read works of progressive educational theory by Gentile, who

had become the Italian Fascist Government's first Minister for Education, and by Maria Montessori, who herself had become an advisor to Mussolini. Yeats reported that the girls' creative writing was remarkable and that 'the children were all clean & neat, & sometimes had embroidered little patterns of their own designs on their dresses' (Foster, 2003: 320). His first visit was apparently unannounced; when he returned the next day, to dine and to inspect the curriculum and the Montessori apparatus, the teachers and girls were more prepared for their visitor, with displays and recitations. Yeats embarrassed the nuns by asking how often the floors were washed and whether the children arrived clean (Foster, 2003: 321).

In May 1926, a few weeks after his visit to St Otteran's, Yeats began the poem 'Among School Children'. In the next section I provide a brief introduction to the poem. I will then outline some of the salient points from the works of Gentile and Whitehead that Yeats had been reading in the months before its composition. After returning to the poem to explore what a knowledge of Gentile's and Whitehead's ideas can contribute to our interpretations of the poem, I will conclude with some comments on the implications for education. My contention is not so much that Yeats's recent philosophical reading directly influenced the composition of this poem but, rather, that a familiarity with his reading can keep us alert to the organic nature of the interpretations the poem permits.

'Among School Children'

The first lines of the poem recall the visit to St Otteran's. Our envisioning of the scene depicted is somewhat unsettled by the idea of a Catholic school of the time doing things in "the best modern way", and by the hint of irony:

> I walk through the long schoolroom questioning,
> A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
> The children learn to cipher and to sing,
> To study reading books and history,
> To cut and sew, be neat in everything
> In the best modern way – the children's eyes
> In momentary wonder stare upon
> A sixty year old smiling public man.

The last three lines of the stanza suggest a momentary mutual apprehension that is closer to puzzlement than to knowledge or understanding.

In the second stanza Yeats alludes to his youthful passion for Maud Gonne. He compares her with Helen of Troy (the progeny of Zeus's rape of Leda) and suggests, in an image taken from Plato's *Symposium*, that their natures at that time seemed to have 'blent' like 'the yolk and white of the one shell'. As the walk through the schoolroom continues, memories of youth fusing with his observation of the children, Maud appears before him 'as a living child'. The real Maud's appearance in old age is depicted in the third stanza, as the poet acknowledges the changes time has wrought on them both. He recalls himself to the schoolroom, but still his mind dwells on innocence and disappointment. With a Neoplatonic notion of the eternal soul in mind, he thinks of a mother – his own mother, all mothers - with a baby on her lap. The baby sleeps or shrieks and its soul struggles to escape its new embodiment. The mother meanwhile is oblivious of the disappointment her son will become to her before he has, as Yeats has now, 'sixty or more winters on its head'. Whatever his youthful dreams, whatever philosophical systems he has created, be he a Plato, an Aristotle or a Pythagoras, an old man amounts only to 'Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird' – a metaphor repeated from another poem in *The Tower*: 'An aged man is but a paltry thing,/A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/Soul clap its hands and sing…' ('Sailing to Byzantium'). It would not be apparent to the schoolchildren that the elderly visitor who is now presenting himself to them as 'a comfortable kind of old scarecrow' is not ready to stop singing.

As he continues his inspection of the schoolroom, the poet's thoughts dwell on mothers and nuns. Both worship 'images' and both are capable of breaking hearts. Yeats implies that these self-created 'Presences/That passion, piety and affection knows' mock our 'enterprise' of achieving unity or equilibrium. Like the schoolchildren's 'modern' curriculum, they cannot bring knowledge of harmony.

In the final stanza Yeats plays with connotations of 'labour', hinting at childbirth, the story of the Fall and his own labour in creating a body of work that aims to achieve unity, beauty and wisdom. The poem ends with what appear to be images of unity:

> O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
> Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
> O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance?

The tree cannot be reduced to its parts, the dancer to her movements, a person to any one moment in her history or to a single personality feature.

Yeats is intimating unity within multiplicity and ceaseless change. However, we sense that there is more to it than that. Critics have seen the poem as an effort to synthesize the different aspects of Yeats's identity and personality 'into something as organic as a chestnut tree, as coherent as a dancer's movements…The dancer swept by music is indissolubly integrated to his dance' (Unterecker, 1959: 191). But we should not overlook Yeats's concern for the schoolchildren and their quizzical presence throughout the poem. In the references to hard work in the first part of the last stanza, Yeats's thinking surely incorporates the children and hints at the progressivist views on childhood and schooling he has gleaned from his reading of Rousseau, Wordsworth and Morris, as well as more recently from Gentile and Montessori:

> Labour is blossoming or dancing where
> The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
> Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
> Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.

Yeats seems here to be affirming the joy of unalienated labour, such as the children might be presumed to be experiencing in school.

But how should we interpret the last line the of the poem? Some critics have interpreted the kind of knowing implied in 'How can we know the dancer from the dance?' as discrimination. Paul de Man is rebuked by Stanley Cavell for reading the line as 'How can we *tell* the dancer from the dance?'. To take a question about knowledge to be asking about telling a difference, 'is to confuse epistemology with rhetoric'. Knowing goes beyond distinguishing. The question is closer, Cavell suggests, to 'How can we know the dancer by means of the dance?' or to 'How can we know the dancer apart from, away from, the dance?' If the implication is that we can't, the poem leaves us poised between hope and despair, 'a fair portrayal of a human life' (Cavell, 1982: 172).

I think Cavell is right about the ending intimating a tension. When content is unsettled by tone we are left with a sense of uncomfortable tension, rather than of resolution. To my ear, the assurance of the organic unity of the chestnut tree is shaken by the ambiguity and uncertain cadence of the poem's final line. Remembering the children, we realise that we cannot know the trajectory of their lives from their present activity. They might be destined for domestic service and relentless child-rearing. Yeats has placed that possibility in our thoughts by his emphasis in the first

stanza on the kindness of the nun, the neatness in everything. Perhaps 'the best modern way' perfectly well recognises the limited reach of its curriculum. We cannot know which, if any, of these girls is 'of Ledaean kind', nor whether any will achieve harmony of being. Perhaps we can only fleetingly know the dancer from the dance, or not at all.

'No possible life', Yeats wrote in his initial notes for the poem, 'can fulfil [the children's] own dreams or even their teachers' hopes' (Bradford, 1965: 4). It is this thought that has agitated Yeats's consciousness of his own fragmentation. It is expressed in the structure and cadences of the poem as well as in the content. The children seeing the sixty-year old senator-poet in one aspect, as inspector, cannot know how well he is doing in the quest for unity of being, and nor can he know how well *they* are doing – not from how they appear, not even from what they create. In the final lines of the poem Yeats has created an image of unity that also conveys a sceptical doubt.

It is not an easy poem to grasp, nor would we want it to be. It is helpful to keep in mind the image of a walk through the children's schoolroom: the activities and performances, the complexities of fleeting glances and flashes of memory, the wonder, doubt and self-consciousness, the developing young minds and the poet's yearning. Complex poems and busy schoolrooms admit of many envisionings and apperceptions. Knowing that Yeats had been reading in Gentile that the mind is a "constructive process" can stiffen our resistance to settled meanings and understandings. Even Yeats's desire for unity of being was complicated by his reading of Gentile, as was his thinking about knowledge and education.

Gentile's Actual Idealism

This would have been encountered by Yeats in H. Wildon Carr's translation, published as *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act* in 1922. This begins:

> Berkeley in the beginning of the eighteenth century expressed very clearly the following concept. Reality is conceivable only in so far as the reality conceived is in relation to the activity which conceives it, and in that relation it is not only a possible object of knowledge, it is a present and actual one. To conceive a reality is to conceive, at the same time and as one with it, the mind in which that reality is represented; and therefore the concept of a material reality is absurd. (Gentile, 2017: 17)

But Gentile thinks Berkeley contradicts the fundamental principle of his whole thought by asserting *esse est percipi* and then postulating an eternal Thought that gives objects a reality independent of individual minds. Thinking, Gentile insists, is always actual, a present activity. We distinguish what we are thinking from the 'we' who thinks, the subject of the thinking that becomes an object only by a process of analysis or self-reflection. The subject is not an 'outside onlooker'; rather, our self, our subjectivity, is mental activity. The mind is not a substance but a constructive process or 'development', a term that implies both unity and multiplicity, but not in the sense in which the germ of a plant contains a unity that then 'develops' through progressive differentiation:

> [W]hen we oppose the germ to the plant, the tender seedling springing from the soil to the big tree with its wide-spreading branches, we are letting the living plant escape…We have multiplicity it is true, but not the reality which comes by the multiplication into different forms of what throughout the development is and always remains one. (*Ibid*: 50)

The developing mind is a unity in which the harmony and synthesis of various elements "exist in such wise that there is neither unity without multiplicity, nor multiplicity without unity" (*ibid*: 51). Fixed thoughts, to which logical principles such as non-contradiction apply, and are essential for providing concepts for thinking, are described as *thought thought* and opposed to true thought, which is *thought thinking*. Thinking is activity and references to it as a noun are abstractions or metaphors.

Gentile's epistemology consists of forms of constructivism and coherentism. We construct the most coherent and convincing account of the world that we can. Truth is the internal coherence of thinking that is affirmable by a conscientious thinker. It is not transcendent of our knowledge of it, out there waiting to be discovered: it is known for what it is when the thinker has constructed it for herself (Wakefield, 2015: 58). Although we must maintain and alter beliefs conscientiously, it is only in retrospect, in abstraction, that we can regard them as mistaken. Despite this subjectivity, Gentile sees human nature as absolutely social. We are connected to others, and across time, by language, institutions, arts, religions and moral traditions, by books and history. We construct the thoughts of others for ourselves, from their speech and writing. The possibility of not being a person amongst persons is only abstractly conceivable. Our will is rational, which means an individual will is subsidiary to the universal will. Our conscience is socialised, in dialogue with an alter-ego that we recognise as authoritative for us. Ultimately, for Gentile this is the will of the state.

In addition to his metaphysics, Gentile wrote extensively on pedagogy, curriculum and educational reform (Gentile, 1923). The aim of education for Gentile is the development of mind, will and moral character. It is meaningless if the student is not actively engaged in evaluating, understanding and realising the content of the lesson. It is not a process of imparting information to a passive, already fully-formed person; rather, acquiring knowledge is an active process by which a person is developed, although the process is never completed. The teacher's mission is to allow the student to understand herself in self-conscious relation to the world around her, enabling her access to culture, history, society. Education has to be philosophical, for it is concerned with the true nature of reality and with self-realisation. Recognising others as members of a shared collective identity allows students to comprehend and respond to others' moral claims. A person does not have moral goodness abstractly, for the realisation of goodness consists in action and process, and moral education imbues the relationship between student and teacher. A major outcome of education is that the student will be more autonomous than she would otherwise have been. It requires her to be equipped to recognise coherence and to eliminate false propositions from her beliefs. She must construct her own values and beliefs, judging truth claims for herself and thereby constructing herself.

Gentile wanted to combine what appears to be a fairly progressivist approach to pedagogy with a strongly interventionist role for the state in schooling. Having encountered Gentile's and Montessori's ideas, and Mussolini's authoritarianism, on a visit to Ezra Pound in Italy in 1925, Yeats must have been aware of the parallels between Italy and Ireland at that time and of the role state-sponsored schooling could play in promoting national and cultural unity.

Excited as he was by his reading of Gentile, Yeats was even more pleased to have discovered a mathematician (albeit one who had turned to speculative metaphysics) to further vindicate, as he saw it, his way of thinking. Not having had a formal education in philosophy, he was delighted to find reassurance from so authoritative a source: 'I have found a very difficult but profound person, Whitehead, who seems to have reached my own conclusion about ultimate things…Not that he would recognise his abstract triumph in my gay rabble' (Wade, 1954: 712). As with Gentile's account of the mind as constructive development, Whitehead's account of reality as consisting of processes and activity can enrich our readings of 'Among School Children'.

Whitehead's Process Philosophy

Yeats was an early admirer of Whitehead's metaphysics. Still best known in the UK as the Cambridge mathematician who collaborated with Russell on *Principia Mathematica* and as the author of *The Aims of Education,* Whitehead has been admired in the USA by theologians and in Europe by philosophers such as Deleuze. Bruno Latour described him, mischievously, as the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century whose name began with W.

Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1925), the predecessor of his masterwork, *Process and Reality* (1929), is part history of the relations between science, mathematics and philosophy, part speculative metaphysics. He tells us that underlying the successes of the seventeenth century scientist-mathematicians was a particular answer to the question concerning what nature is made of. The answer was matter, stuff with a simple location in time and space. But seeing the world in terms of substances with simple location is fine only so long as we can live with the highly abstract entities we are left with when we suppress the 'irrelevant' details, the accidental, changeable qualities, and locate the primary substratum (such as mass). Even such apparently defining qualities of particular bodies as noisiness or blueness were assumed to reduce to mere motion of material; in which case, in what sense are they qualities of that body? When poets praise the rose for its scent and the nightingale for its song, do they misplace the credit?

The bifurcated model of what there is, foisted by scientists upon philosophy as undeniable fact, mistakes abstraction for concrete reality and is responsible for the mind/matter dualism. It has led philosophers, such as Hume, to base faith in reason on faith in an orderly universe. We cannot think without abstractions, Whitehead acknowledges, but it is a philosopher's job to be a critic of the ruling abstractions and to propose new ones. 'A civilisation which cannot burst through its current abstractions is doomed to sterility after a very limited period of progress' (*ibid*, p. 59).

But idealism, too, has failed to connect 'in any organic fashion' with nature. Whitehead's proposal is to recast 'the scientific scheme', founding it upon the ultimate concept of organism, and locating human cognition within the complex community of interlocking organic events. Knowledge, as we normally conceive it, is a process of abstraction from organic complexity. Whitehead suggests that instead of things being realised in the unity of the mind, as Berkeley contends, the realisation is the gathering of things into the unity of a pre-epistemic *prehension*. What is realised is not the things but the prehension. 'This unity of a prehension defines itself as a here and a now, and the things so gathered into the grasped unity have essential reference to other places and other times' (*ibid*: 69). Simple objects with a simple location have been eliminated.

In presenting nature as organisms in the process of development, Whitehead shows it to be orderly. We are asked to imagine events as exhibiting both a unity and an inherent transitoriness.

Each event has a 'value', an intrinsic reality that is the outcome of its limitation. But even a relatively enduring thing is not self-sufficient. It is only itself insofar as it draws together into its own limitations the larger whole in which it finds itself. Each thing is a more-or-less transitory event that is part of organic nature. From poets such as Wordsworth and Shelley, Whitehead writes, we learn that a philosophy of nature must concern itself with change, value, eternal objects, endurance, organism and interfusion (*ibid*: 88). The rainbow, which according to Keats Newton destroyed, is rewoven into the complex fabric of nature.

Whitehead rejects idealism and subjectivism. A schoolroom, for example, does not cease to exist when the children and teachers have gone home, when there is no cognisance of the shifting shadows and gurgling pipes. He sees his position as that of an objectivist who takes ordinary, naïve experience seriously and therefore wants to retain the conviction that we exist 'within a world of colours, sounds, and other sense objects, related in space and time to enduring objects such as stones, trees and human bodies' (*ibid*: 89). Yeats must have felt that Whitehead's realism resonated with his own ideas, elaborated in *A Vision*, concerning change, complexity, coherence and the involvement in reality of modes of apperception that other forms of realism had eliminated.

The final chapter of *Science and the Modern World*, entitled 'Requisites for Social Progress', is largely concerned with education. Isabelle Stengers summarises it as follows:

> His guiding idea is that children are lively and interested, and that the first problem in education is to nourish interest without killing life. What Whitehead calls education does not, therefore, in the first instance designate a reliable transmission of information, or a training in skills that could be evaluated, nor, moreover, the opposite slogan, the respect of differences and the autonomy of the 'learner'. In fact, education mobilizes all the themes that will oblige him to think as a philosopher: coherence, interest, importance, life, values, emotions, specialization, abstraction, and above all trust. All themes of which the thought of the organism will propose an initial articulation…For Whitehead, thinking about what social progress requires designates education as a crucial site, in which an epoch judges itself on the basis of the way it fashions those who will prolong its choices, strengths and weaknesses. Education can create the habit of appreciating concrete facts, complete facts. It can also create the opposite habit…[as in the case of thinkers who] have prolonged, in a routine way, the incredible theses that made nature bifurcate and reduced reality to the agitation of stupid, insensate matter. (Stengers, 2011: 139-140)

These ideas are similar to Gentile's. In the final section of the paper I will comment on the educational principles that Whitehead, Gentile and Yeats shared at this point in their lives, in the mid-1920s. But first I want to revisit the schoolroom to explore how our metaphysical detour informs our reading of the poem.

'Reading 'Among School Children' with Gentile and Whitehead

Although he certainly engaged seriously with philosophical arguments in his debate with Sturge Moore, I think it is clear that Yeats's interest in philosophy was as much to do with how ideas excited his imagination as with how they appealed to his reason. Nevertheless, he was pleased to think that science and philosophy might begin to vindicate his own commitments and connect with the mystical traditions in which he was expert.

It is easy to see why Gentile's 'thought thinking' would have appealed to Yeats. Subjectivity, 'the inner nature in which our spiritual nature consists', as the activity of present thinking, which can somehow penetrate the subjectivity of others, satisfying a deep need for unity with others and also within ourselves, resonates with the images of activity and coherence in *A Vision* and *The Tower*, and with the yearning for unity of being. Perpetual change and complexity, in nature and in human affairs, had been a theme in earlier poems (for example, in 'Easter 1916': 'A shadow of cloud on the stream/Changes minute by minute'). Gentile's notion of development as a constructive, never-to-be-completed process, in the course of which the original 'germ' is not lost, also resonates with Yeats's yearning for unity of being. We see it in 'Among School Children', where the baby on the mother's lap, the children, the young lovers, the mothers themselves, the pious women and kindly nuns, the poet and the aging public man, can all be seen as instants in a complex, coherent, organic process. This is not the coherence or unity of overlapping continuity but that of a seed that survives the blossoming and the withering, and that will persist. Thinking is the reality in which the past and the future cohere, and which, precisely because of its rational autonomous nature, allows us to share something of our subjectivity with others. James Wakefield defends Gentile from the claim that his idealism collapses into a form of solipsism (Wakefield, 2015: 64 – 67). Had Yeats thought that it did, he would not have been able to claim that there was little significant difference between Gentile's idealism and Whitehead's realism.

Whitehead shares with Gentile a sense of reality as activity and an understanding of knowledge as constructed from abstractions that are open to evaluation and imaginative

reconfiguration. Whitehead's ideas excited Yeats's imagination, at this point in his life, at least as much as Gentile's. So, how might thinking with Gentile and Whitehead influence our readings of 'Among School Children'?

In the first place, I think we can become more aware of how the compositional poise of the poem is in tension with the activity of its ideas. We are delayed by a series of tableaux and images, but the movement of the mood, of the rhythm and the cadences, intimates an underlying coherence and we struggle not to lose the germ of the poem in its wanderings. The children, their education, their development, their activities, are present throughout. The narrative abstracts but allows us to be conscious of the larger process. The moment of a particular look or smile takes its reality from the unity of the event, where individual thoughts and feelings are in interdependent relation with each other, constituted by aspects of the others: moments of interfusing processes within the greater process of the inspection, the walk, the entire lives of all present. We lose this sense of an organic complexity if we do not keep the children and teacher in mind, and lose, too, the educational implications of the ideas in the final stanzas.

Our learning is bounded by abstractions that can give only a partial glimpse of truth, one that has passed before it has been fully grasped. The children's 'modern' curriculum cannot prevent this. The Presences, the 'self-born mockers of man's enterprise', whether or not they 'keep a marble or a bronze repose', are included in the abstractions from which we construct the ways of knowing that form a curriculum and pedagogy. The knowledge and beliefs - provided by schools, nuns, mothers - can lead us to bruise our bodies through joyless labour and to seek 'blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil': the labour, it might be, of the children's schoolwork, the labour of public duties, of studying philosophy, the nun's work as a teacher, the labour of childbirth. If we could achieve the kind of joyful unalienated condition symbolised by the imagery of blossoming and dancing and achieve the coherence of the chestnut tree, which also is, despite its apparent solidity, a developing process, then our life, our thinking, our 'labour' could achieve harmony. 'O chestnut tree…O body swayed to music, O brightening glance' – these excited exclamations will surely bring us to a final line with an idea and a cadence suggesting unity and completion…

Instead, there is a question that arrests rather than resolves. We can interpret it as suggesting an image, like the chestnut tree, of unity within multiplicity. But we realise that the question is itself multiple. How can we *know* the dancer from the dance? How can we know the dancer *from* the dance? How can *we* know the dancer from the dance? What is the dancer's relationship to the dance? Is it choreographed, with fixed patterns, or the free expression of calisthenics? Freedom or determinism? Where does it begin and end? What is our relationship to

the dancer and the dance? Perhaps that brightening glance, different from the other looks and glances in the poem, draws the observer into the dance? With Gentile we can think that all we can ever know without abstraction is the present instant of thinking, so how can we ever achieve a settled knowledge and understanding of something isolated from the constant flux? Any patterns we discern are abstractions from the whole. Or we can recall Whitehead's suggestion that attention to any group of abstractions (the dancer, the dance, we ourselves, abstracted from the total nexus of present processes) means that we exclude other important aspects of our experience. Our modes of thought are not suited to fully apprehending the event.

In ending the poem with a question and in allowing a multiplicity of interpretations, Yeats is unsettling our current modes of abstraction. Any knowledge we achieve is transitory and partial, a mere glimpse. We lose it before we have quite grasped it. We have to keep asking the question. So, any reading of the poem will not endure completely. When we employ 'reading' as a noun we reify an event that is never quite repeatable. Yeats has created a poem that displays his genius for compositional balance, but it is not the balance of permanent stasis. It is more like the precariously shifting balance of Alexander Calder mobiles in a busy room: never quite at rest.

Educational Implications

Readings should be restless. George Orwell argued that insofar as we judge a poem by the appreciation in arouses, it could be good on Monday and bad on Tuesday: 'because appreciation, or enjoyment, is a subjective condition which cannot be commanded' (*1968*: 220). On any particular occasion, what we bring to a reading of a poem, what floats into the mind, including our current feelings about the writer's life and politics, influences our appreciation in the moment, our *thought thinking*. The person and the poem, like the dancer and the dance, present competing modes of apprehension.

What is happening when a class of students reads 'Among School Children'? It is certainly a complexity of restless events. Each student has thoughts that float into her mind, some of which t can be shared through discussion, some private, irrelevant or ineffable. We ask students to capture some of their thoughts and interpretations in writing and to abstract from their own subjectivity to something discoverable by all; but do we, I wonder as I reflect on my experience of teaching poetry, really encourage an openness to reactivating their readings, to keeping them moving? Often, it seems that we ask students to visit poems, to inspect or "know" them, rather than to appreciate

them. I think Yeats, Whitehead and Gentile would have agreed that readings, and all thinking and learning, should be restless.

It seems that at one point in time Yeats would have agreed with many of Whitehead's and Gentile's educational principles as well as with their metaphysics. In due course Gentile's ideas contorted to fit with fascism, of which he was the principal philosopher, and Yeats's belief in eugenics led him to espouse deeply objectionable ideas about the education of the 'ignorant classes' and 'inferior races' in his 1938 pamphlet *On the Boiler* (Maddox, 1999: 336 – 337). We cannot always choose to be ignorant of such things when reading the poems, and nor does a shared view of education, or a shared evaluation of a writer, predict agreement on politics or social policy. There is nothing inherently either right-wing or left-wing about progressivism, holism or constructivism, for example. It is not implausible, then, that in the mid-1920s Yeats, Gentile and the liberal-minded Whitehead would have achieved a consensus, coherent with their metaphysics, concerning schooling.

They would have agreed that it should be creative and dynamic and that children should enjoy their labours; it should help them to think less in terms of objects and more in terms of organisms and activity, and to understand that whatever concepts we think with we inevitably employ particular modes of abstraction. It should help them to appreciate the complex interrelatedness of aspects of reality and how attention to some aspects excludes attention to others equally important. It should help them to speculate imaginatively not just about *what* but also *how* we can know and understand, and to keep asking questions, even the same question, because contexts change. They would have agreed, I think, that children should be helped to understand themselves in relation to the changing world, including the national culture, around them; and, lastly, it should help them to identify, tentatively, patterns and coherences in natural and historical events, and in the long schoolroom of their own lives.

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Among School Children

I

I walk through the long schoolroom questioning;
A kind old nun in a white hood replies;
The children learn to cipher and to sing,
To study reading-books and history,
To cut and sew, be neat in everything
In the best modern way—the children's eyes
In momentary wonder stare upon
A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent
Above a sinking fire, a tale that she
Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event
That changed some childish day to tragedy—
Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent
Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,
Or else, to alter Plato's parable,
Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage
I look upon one child or t'other there
And wonder if she stood so at that age—
For even daughters of the swan can share
Something of every paddler's heritage—
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?
And I though never of Ledaean kind
Had pretty plumage once—enough of that,
Better to smile on all that smile, and show
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap
Honey of generation had betrayed,
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape
As recollection or the drug decide,
Would think her son, did she but see that shape
With sixty or more winters on its head,
A compensation for the pang of his birth,
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;
Solider Aristotle played the taws
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings
What a star sang and careless Muses heard:
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,
But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother's reveries,
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
And yet they too break hearts—O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?